

PETER BRICKEY LEQUIRE  
AND DANIEL SILVER

*Critical Naïveté?*  
*Religion, Science and Action*  
*in the Parsons-Voegelin Correspondence*

**Abstract**

Between 1940 and 1944, sociologist Talcott Parsons and political scientist Eric Voegelin engaged in a vigorous correspondence, discussing the origins of totalitarianism and modern anti-Semitism, the legacy of Max Weber, patterns of secularization set in motion by the Protestant Reformation, the methodology and goals of social science, and more. This article introduces and explicates the surprisingly amicable and intellectually rich exchange between these two seemingly different thinkers. Although the letters hold obvious historical interest, their variegated topics are also closely thematically related, revealing an inner logic that we interpret as a theoretical search for “critical naïveté”. This logic, we argue, is relevant to contemporary discussions about the social, political, and scientific legacies of world-transcendent spiritual traditions.

*Keywords:* Parsons; Voegelin; Religion; Theory of action; Anti-Semitism; Transcendence; Axial age.

TALCOTT PARSONS (1902-1979) needs no introduction; he is well-known within sociology for his foundational contributions to that field, and familiar to English-speaking scholars in many disciplines through his influential translations of Max Weber’s writings. Eric Voegelin (1901-1985), by contrast, has long been highly praised by a few political theorists and philosophers, but generally neglected by mainstream social scientists. Voegelin was born in Germany but educated in Austria. During the 1930s, his publications on legal theory and intellectual history were biting critical of Nazi ideology. Following the *Anschluss* in 1938 he narrowly evaded the Gestapo and fled with his wife to the United States; they were naturalized as American citizens in 1944. Voegelin taught briefly at Harvard University, Bennington College, and the University of Alabama

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Peter Brickey LEQUIRE, Department of Political Science, Samford University [pblequir@samford.edu].

Daniel SILVER, Department of Sociology, University of Toronto [dsilver@utsc.utoronto.ca].

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before finding a permanent position at Louisiana State University in 1942. There he began a grandly ambitious philosophy of history that earned him brief fame in the mid-1950s, and (to his chagrin) a number of lasting admirers among conservative American intellectuals. In 1958 he was offered a post at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich – the chair in political science that had been empty since the death of its previous occupant, Max Weber, in 1920 – and so returned to Germany. There he founded an Institute for Political Science and contributed to public debates about Germany's Nazi past and democratic future, but kept his American citizenship. Over time, he became increasingly occupied with his own meditative, philosophical study of human consciousness. In 1969 Voegelin retired to the Hoover Institution of Stanford University, and continued to write until his death.

Although not a sectarian thinker, Voegelin held that a society's political order depended on its spiritual health, and that political theory must therefore include the evaluation of religious beliefs and theological ideas. Only in recent years, as the continuing significance of religion in modern public life has become increasingly apparent, have his writings begun to attract a wider readership. Yet in his own day Voegelin's interest in the interplay of religion and politics was shared by Parsons, so much so that between 1940 and 1944 the two men engaged in a vigorous correspondence – twenty-five extant letters that touch on the origins of totalitarianism and modern anti-Semitism, the legacy of Max Weber, the patterns of secularization set in motion by the Protestant Reformation, and more. The letters – a revealing intellectual exchange now published on the *European Journal of Sociology* website in its entirety – served to extend and refine ideas that Parsons and Voegelin developed in face-to-face conversations, ideas which hold broad relevance for contemporary sociology and political theory, and for the study of religion's role in public life.<sup>1</sup> With the publication of the complete correspondence, a broader intellectual community is now in a position to assess this rich dialogue. The letters hold obvious appeal for historians of ideas, of the social sciences, and of the academy in twentieth-century Europe and America. Yet the significance of the exchange is not just historical, for its seemingly variegated topics are, in fact, closely thematically related and reveal an inner logic.

This essay articulates that logic in five sections. First, we situate the correspondence in relation to the projects Parsons and Voegelin were

<sup>1</sup> Most letters by Voegelin, but none by Parsons, are printed in Voegelin 1989–2009, vol. 29, and all are in Bortolini 2000 (in Italian translation). The Parsons-Voegelin letters referred to in this article are available online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0003975613000192>.

engaged in at the time, namely Parsons' theory of social action and institutional integration and Voegelin's philosophical history of political ideas. Both endeavors were motivated by a distinctive concern for secularization, and in a similarly unusual sense. Secularization for Parsons and Voegelin does not imply the disappearance of world-transcendent symbols from social life but modern society's appropriation (for good or for ill) of ideas of transcendence. This shared attitude toward the enduring relevance of transcendent imagery in modern society is one of the intellectual affinities that brought the two men together into correspondence.

Second, we highlight those letters in which Parsons and Voegelin discuss two patterns of secularization, one they associate more with Lutheranism, the other with Calvinism. They connect these patterns to disparate tendencies toward anti-Semitism, haltingly working through ideas they would publish later in more polished form.

Third, we turn to Parsons' controversy with the Austrian émigré Alfred Schütz, the eminent philosopher who provided much of the inspiration for phenomenological sociology.<sup>2</sup> In May 1941, Parsons asked Voegelin to mediate in what had become an unpleasant controversy with Schütz. Although Schütz and Voegelin were longtime friends with similar academic training, in this matter Voegelin's intellectual sympathies were with Parsons. The correspondence suggests that by 1940 Parsons and Voegelin had come independently to agreement on the important methodological issues that separated Parsons and Schütz.

The discussion turns on the proper methodology for a social science that aims to do justice to the subjective element of human action. Voegelin clarifies the sources of the dispute by tracing it back to the very different intellectual cultures within which Parsons and Schütz developed their ideas – Schütz in the more speculative Austrian milieu, Parsons in the more empirical-scientific American one. This account of the controversy provokes a self-reflective turn in the correspondence, where both men begin to articulate the role of transcendence in their own approaches to social science.

The fourth section takes up the topic that most divides Parsons and Voegelin: the interpretation of Max Weber. Parsons sees in Weber a first step toward a systematic social science; Voegelin sees in Weber an example of the irreducibly fragmentary character of the creative intellect. This seemingly small interpretative disagreement foreshadows the divergent trajectories Parsons and Voegelin will take. Each in his

<sup>2</sup> Grathoff 1978 contains the Parsons-Schütz correspondence, and Rehorick and Buxton (1988) discuss Voegelin's role in the exchange.

own way goes in search of what we call “critical naïveté,” a capacity for reflective distance that does not lose empirical or practical touch with that which one has transcended. Parsons becomes more critical in assessing the religious conditions of his own previously “naïve” stance, even as Voegelin becomes more “naïve” in embracing the truths he finds in ancient traditions.

Finally, we connect the correspondence as a whole to ongoing discussions of transcendence and social science, especially “the axial age debate”. In the form given to it by Karl Jaspers (1949), that debate is grounded in the humanistic sense that transcendent religion can foster a politically salutary kind of subjective belief (Jaspers 1953: 164; see also Armstrong 2006). The universalism implicit in multiple religious traditions, not to mention Greek rationalism, points toward the shared human capacity to transcend local circumstances and find a common humanity (see Boy and Torpey 2013). The Parsons-Voegelin correspondence, however, indicates another inspiration for discussions of the great axial traditions. In religious history, the breakthrough to transcendence is produced by, and in turn produces, a critical stance toward received dogma, traditional social norms, and local practices. In recent history, the Axial Age debate itself has become a medium for public reflection on the conditions of the possibility of this critical stance. Neither affirming nor denying its empirical validity, we observe that the Axial Age debate functions as a “metadiscourse” in which scholars of diverse political, scientific, and religious (or non-religious) backgrounds communicate across methodological lines (see, *e.g.*, Black 2008, Dalferth 2012, and Green 1992). Parsons’ and Voegelin’s epistolary discussion of the scientific and political legacies of transcendence, we argue, presages this debate, to which both thinkers would subsequently and substantially contribute.

Although their friendship was short-lived, their remarkable mutual intelligibility was no coincidence; it bespoke a spiritual kinship grounded in the shared conviction that social-scientific methodology must be adapted to reflect social reality, with the aim of fostering meaningful social action.

### *Theory of social action – History of political ideas*

Parsons and Voegelin struck up their friendship during the autumn of 1938 at Harvard University, where Voegelin held a temporary appointment in the Department of Government, and Parsons – already

a leading figure in American sociology – was a member of the fledgling Department of Sociology. Having fled Austria soon after his summary dismissal from the University of Vienna, Voegelin needed a patron to help him secure an academic position and financial support, and came to rely on Parsons as a professional reference (see Voegelin 4/2/1942, 1/16/1943, and 6/9/1944).

But far more connected the two than just a patron-client relationship. Building on Max Weber, each saw metaphysical and religious aspirations as significant forces driving history. What is more, Parsons and Voegelin were somewhat liminal figures within their respective academic communities. In the 1920s, Parsons' studies in Germany brought him into intellectual contact with writers like Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies, and Werner Sombart, then barely known in the United States. In the same decade, Voegelin studied in the United States with John R. Commons, John Dewey, and Alfred North Whitehead – the last a major influence on Parsons in the 1930s.

Yet the major point of affinity between Parsons and Voegelin lies in their common attempt to understand the singular role of religious values and myths in human society. Both writers aim to steer a middle course between positivistic description – which reduces the symbolic to the status of any other human motivation – and idealist speculation – which cannot account for the ways in which different values become meaningful to different people in different concrete historical circumstances. While not explicitly oriented toward “the axial age debate”, this is the theoretical problematic which would later set that debate in motion.

Parsons and Voegelin began their correspondence at a point when the ideas that would occupy them for decades to come were in ferment. In 1936, Voegelin had published *Der autoritäre Staat: Ein Versuch über das österreichische Staatsproblem*, a qualified defense of state authoritarianism as the best safeguard of Austrian freedom (Voegelin 1989-2009, v. 4). Its practical counsel rested on a theoretical critique of the “pure theory of law” of Hans Kelsen, who had drafted the liberal Austrian Constitution of 1920, and served as one of Voegelin's two *Doktorväter* at the University of Vienna (see Voegelin 9/3/1941). Around the time of the *Anschluss*, Voegelin drove the wedge between himself and Kelsen even deeper with *Die politische Religionen* (translated in Voegelin 1989-2009, v. 5: 19-74). This short book expanded on his earlier studies of race and state ideology (*Rasse und Staat* and *Die Rassenidee in der Geistesgeschichte von Ray bis Carus*, both 1933; translated in Voegelin 1989-2009, v. 2-3), but from a bold new methodological stance. Here he argued that Communism and Nazism alike

were “inner-worldly religions” that located ultimate meaning not in a transcendent God, but rather in human institutions of class or state (Voegelin 1989-2009, v. 5: 50-51). The immediate political crisis, he suggested, grew from a twisted religious taproot that “secularized minds” could not grasp, much less eradicate (Voegelin 1989-2009, v. 5: 24).

In marking a turn toward political theology that would occupy him for much of his career, *The Political Religions* represented a watershed moment for Voegelin.<sup>3</sup> At the time of the correspondence, Voegelin was already hard at work on a related project that would occupy him off and on until 1954, the massive *History of Political Ideas*.<sup>4</sup> Unlike political theory, “political ideas” consist not of social-scientific knowledge but of socially efficacious myths, shared beliefs that serve to create and sustain political group identity. The *History* expanded on Voegelin’s early works on the political ideas of race and state, works with which Parsons seems to have been familiar (see Voegelin 1/20/1940, Parsons 2/8/1940 and 8/16/1940). In the spring of 1941, Voegelin was finishing a draft of its chapter on the Protestant Reformation, under the title “The Great Confusion” (Voegelin 1989-2009 v. 22: 217-292, and v. 23: 17-69). His claims about the causes and consequences of John Calvin’s doctrine of Predestination would take a central place in the correspondence with Parsons.

Voegelin finally set the *History* project aside, but would draw on it heavily in his efforts to construct a new political science in which the human experience of “world-transcendent divine Being” serves as the touchstone of order in personal and public life (Voegelin 1989-2009, v. 15: 68). We can understand and foster democratic political institutions, Voegelin later argued, only by keenly discerning the theological concepts and religious conflicts from which democracy emerged (see Voegelin 1989-2009 v. 5: 109-128, and v. 11: 59-82). By the early 1950s, Voegelin had come to believe that such discernment required a creative restoration of Classical political philosophy. This was not out of nostalgia. Modern industrialization, Voegelin writes, created a worldwide “pressure toward pragmatic rationality of action” (that is, reasoning based on empirical observation and instrumental calculation) as well as a world in which the “romantic revolt and the dream of

<sup>3</sup> On political theology in Voegelin, see LeQuire 2011; on myth, see Hughes 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Now published in Voegelin 1989-2009 v. 19-26. Begun as a textbook, the *History* soon morphed into a grand attempt to trace

the origins of modern political theory and ideology, beginning with Hellenism, Rome, and early Christianity; it was left unfinished and mostly unpublished at its author’s death.

returning to the simple life make no sense at all” (Voegelin 1989-2009, v. 11: 178-190). Voegelin turns toward transcendence not in rejection of pragmatic rationality, but in recognition of its inherent limitations.

In *The New Science of Politics* (1952), Voegelin proclaims that “positivism,” the reductive attempt to make “the social sciences ‘scientific’ through the methods that as closely as possible resemble the methods employed in sciences of the external world”, was inadequate to the task (Voegelin 1989-2009, v. 5: 93). In *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (1958-1960) he states that German idealism, too, was worse than a dead-end; Immanuel Kant and his followers presupposed a human subject magically removed from particular historical context and purified of all human desires (Voegelin 1989-2009, v. 5: 60-61, 251).

Voegelin argued instead that the methodology proper to theoretically sound political science was “the philosophy of history”. In *Order and History*, vols. 1-3 (1956-1957), he begins to flesh out his ambitious “new science” by narrating the emergence of political order from transcendent religious experience in ancient Greece and Israel, and in pre-Reformation Christianity. This grand (yet ever evolving and never completed) sacred narrative of civilizational birth and decay supplies a nobler and truer myth than rival modern ideological constructions. Voegelin’s acceptance of myth as an expression of truth came slowly and even grudgingly; in the period of the Parsons correspondence, he still suggests that political myths are by definition false, a worthy object of study only because of their power and utility (Voegelin 1989-2009, v. 19: 225-237). The exchange with Parsons during the early 1940s played a key role in changing his mind.

Parsons, too, had just issued a major publication, *The Structure of Social Action* (1937). In Parsons’ view, “positivism” turns human action into a function of environment and heredity.<sup>5</sup> His book proposed a “voluntaristic theory of action”, designed to go beyond this reductive approach. *Structure* also disputed the narrow conception of decision-making characteristic of economists who limit behavior to rational calculations of efficiency. Yet Parsons was equally critical of what he called “emanationist idealism”, according to which human action flows more or less automatically from a cultural system, or “spirit of the times”.

Rather, Parsons argued that norms and values always mediate decisions. To develop this alternative view, he showed how Alfred Marshall,

<sup>5</sup> Quite the opposite of beliefs held by Auguste Comte, the father of positivism. See Levine 1980.

Vilfredo Pareto, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim – each starting from different assumptions, and working in different national contexts – independently “converged” on a “voluntaristic” understanding of action. In this understanding, collective norms and values are conceived as irreducible elements of human behavior that are always mediated by concrete situations and exigencies. In thus seeking to provide a “charter for sociology”, Parsons sparked a debate over sociology’s place among the human sciences that persists to this day.<sup>6</sup> In the meantime, his early effort to steer a middle course between idealism and positivism left Parsons suspicious of both.

At the same time, Parsons was preparing new translations of and introductions to Weber’s institutional theory, then largely unknown in America. Following his landmark translation of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in 1931, in 1947 he added the *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, which includes the first four chapters of *Economy and Society* (Weber 1947). This work on Weber fed into Parsons’ own attempts to connect his theory of action more explicitly with a theory of structures and institutions, which would start to come to fruition in the 1950s with *The Social System* (1951) and *Towards a General Theory of Action* (1951), but take its fullest form in later works such as *Economy and Society* (1956) and *Politics and Social Structure* (1969).

It is in this connection that we can appreciate Parsons’ studies on the sources of German anti-Semitism and Nazism, as well as on the possibilities for building a stable German liberal-democratic state based on sociological knowledge of the causes of its dysfunction. In his early letters to Voegelin, Parsons places particular weight on Germany’s Lutheran heritage. While this emphasis persists, however, his later papers place less weight on Lutheranism and more on class and status conflicts and the disruptions caused by rapid industrialization.<sup>7</sup> In Germany, however, these general upheavals of modernity, Parsons argued, were dangerously heightened by a nationalist politics infused with “romantic, unrealistic emotionalism and yearnings” (quoted in Gerhardt 2002: 115). Accordingly, perhaps the central challenge of post-war reconstruction was to build an institutional order in which “Germans’ romanticizing their nation should become utterly impossible” (quoted in Gerhardt 2002: 98). While the romantic strain toward

<sup>6</sup> See Camic 1989 and on the convergence concept Yang 1986.

<sup>7</sup> One of Parsons’ students did pursue the religious themes in more detail (Kayser 1961). And Parsons continued to stress Lutheranism,

as in a letter he wrote to Margaret Mead on the topic of German reconstruction in May 1944 (Parsons, letter to Mead, May 19, 1944, quoted in Gerhardt 2002: 113).



transcendent hopes could (and should) not be eradicated, it might instead “find an apolitical form of expression” in “industrialism” and “those elements of modern Germany [...] which are closest to their counterparts in the democratic countries” (quoted in Gerhardt 2002: 115). In Parsons’ view, then, a crucial task of modern social science was to discern institutional arrangements that could “secularize” transcendent aspirations and channel them into productive and inclusive uses rather than destructive and divisive ones. In the correspondence with Voegelin, which opens with an exchange on the sources of Germany’s *Sonderweg*, this aspiration, and the notion of secularization that corresponds with it, are core topics.

*From Reformation to World War II: two patterns of secularization*

The specter of Nazism lent these theoretical questions a deep sense of urgency. Voegelin and Parsons take this urgency in two directions. Looking back, they discuss the lingering effects of Reformation ideas of transcendence in utopian ambitions endemic to modern society, and examine how those ambitions explain various strains of anti-Semitism in Germany and the United States. But they also think together about how to move forward while acknowledging our heavy dependence on Reformation traditions, whether this means a revitalization of religion, or more modestly a robust affirmation of the contemporary relevance of a cultural heritage that is inseparable from ideas of transcendence.

The exchange begins with a backward glance at the origins of modern anti-Semitism (Parsons 2/8/1940; Voegelin 9/11/1940). In the spirit of *The Protestant Ethic*, both Parsons and Voegelin sought to explain this seemingly secular form of hatred by exploring its historical antecedents in the Protestant Reformation.<sup>8</sup> In this first substantive exchange in the correspondence, Parsons and Voegelin experiment with strategies for connecting *divergent* attitudes toward a transcendent realm with divergent orientations toward national, social, and political missions. In modern Europe, it seemed, world-transcendent religion had opened up not so much a universal space for cultivating a universal humanism but instead had generated a novel *problem*: how does one

<sup>8</sup> Key inspiration also came from Ernst Troeltsch’s observations about “the extreme difficulty of obtaining a stable orientation to worldly affairs in the Lutheran and Calvinistic orientations” (Parsons 9/27/1940).

Catholic France has its own tense dynamics that Voegelin and Parsons do discuss but in less detail than the Anglo vs. Germanic ones (Parsons 5/13/1941; Voegelin 9/11/1940, enclosure of 5/9/1941, 1/16/1943).

orient oneself toward “worldly affairs” when “this world” is a pale, even evil, version of a “higher”, better world?

Voegelin’s letter of September 11, 1940 offers three explanations for the particularly virulent form of anti-Semitism that had engulfed Germany (see Gerhardt 2002, p. 85). First, he suggests that Germans suffered from a feeling of impotence in forging a coherent national identity: “There never has been a German national ‘society’, a ruling class setting standards of conduct as in the Western political communities”. Without a core national cultural image, such as the English gentleman or the French *bourgeois*, Germans suffered acute anxiety about who they really are, and became susceptible to radical political programs that offered hope for a coherent collective identity.

Second, Voegelin traces German racial anxiety back to psychological traits fostered by “a permanent German tendency”, which stressed the “ultimate loneliness of the human personality”, sufficient unto itself. This monadic inwardness, Voegelin suggests, is analogous to the Jewish idea of the Chosen People, which likewise generated a kind of insularity. “This Monadologism has in German history, I think, a function similar to the Jewish belief in the chosen people, and prevents the free formation of contacts and social openness.” While Jewish insularity serves to knit together a community, however, Germanic-Lutheran inwardness initially creates a social vacuum. This vacuum is later filled by monadic individuals highly desirous of community, conjoined merely by a mutual envy of the people whose religiousness largely consists in communal life. But monads cannot co-exist in the same space; there can be only one. The co-mingling of German and Jew creates competition between two “chosen peoples”. German “monadology” thus deems the presence of Jews acutely intolerable, generating a “special cause of anti-Semitism in Germany” that is absent elsewhere.

Third, Voegelin sees in German anti-Semitism a curious brand of self-destructive anti-Christianity that can be addressed “only on the religious level”, not purely sociologically. Voegelin somewhat cryptically alludes to the Nazi unease with the universalistic message of Christ: that through him all may be redeemed, regardless of merit or lineage. Jews of course stubbornly refuse this good news. The result is a novel form of anti-Semitism: the persistence of the Jews in their refusal of Christ becomes intolerable to anti-Christian Germans because it stands as a reminder of Jesus’ redemptive promise. To get rid of that disturbing core of the Gospel, one would need to get rid of those whose existence reminds us that there was a messiah to refuse in the first place (9/11/1940; see Voegelin 1989-2009, v. 2: 180-206 and v. 10: 27-61).

Voegelin acknowledges (implicitly here, explicitly in his letter of 1/16/1943) that German anti-Semitism might emerge from a pattern of secularization peculiar to Lutheran peoples. But he takes a grim view of both branches of the Reformation. Parsons, by contrast, draws a sharp distinction between Calvinism and Lutheranism. In his reply to Voegelin's observation about the social-psychological stress created by the lack of a strong national character, Parsons argues that Germany is not unique in this regard. America, too, lacks a unifying iconic cultural image, and, as a result, exhibits a similar inferiority complex. But if this sense of inferiority leads Americans to be somewhat prone to anti-Semitism, which Parsons thinks it does, he does grant a distinction, one grounded in contrasting attitudes toward "the world" in the Lutheran and Calvinist traditions. This is because the Calvinist injunction to build up the Kingdom of God on earth licenses strong social enforcement of Christian ethical principles. Lutheranism, on the other hand, views the world as "frankly and inevitably evil", which weakens the "force of the obligation of Christian charity". The result is that "we are considerably better protected against mass outbursts of this kind of utterly un-Christian aggression than Germany has been" (9/27/1940).

Parsons again highlights the Calvinist difference in his response to Voegelin's point regarding the psychological effects of being chosen. Calvinists, he notes, operate with a "Chosen People" idea of their own: the righteous Army of the Elect. But the Calvinist strain is more self-confident, less marked by the "acceptance and expectation of persecution", less linked to nostalgic memories of a heroic past, and more influenced by a long tradition of theological reflection on religious and civil community. The Germanic-Lutheran version, by contrast, contains notes of melancholy and defeatism, which swell into resentment toward groups who can live on "that order of hope" that messianic belief implies. To make matters worse, as Nazism begins to propose its own utopia in the form of the Third Reich, "which outdoes anything certainly in the main traditions of western Europe and is at least as unrealistic as the socialists' Utopia", it overcompensates for its pessimist roots, and lashes out at the Jews with a "particular hatred because of their competitive similarity in this respect" (9/27/1940). The Nazis declared themselves the true and exclusive bearers of these universalities.

Finally, Parsons answers Voegelin's third point about the anti-Christian character of German anti-Semitism. Christianity, he writes, drives the emergence of "positivistic rationalism" and, at the very same time, breeds various types of anti-rational, anti-scientific "fundamentalisms": "the conflict which is put, among other things, as

the conflict between science and religion in our culture reflects an inner tension in a single great tradition rather than the ultimate conflict of opposed traditions" (9/27/1940). Nazism, Parsons suggests, is of a piece with this fundamentalist orientation within Christianity. But rather than attack its Christian "brothers", Nazism finds a convenient symbol of the deracinating, corrosive effects of rationalism in the Jews. Through a bizarre inversion, Nazis transmute their abhorrence toward the universalistic message of Jesus Christ into a hatred of Jews, made all the more virulent because it was really displaced insecurity in the form of hatred toward the Nazis' own cultural heritage (9/27/1940).<sup>9</sup> The specifically Judeo-Christian form of transcendence generates uniquely dangerous inner strains between a critical-theoretical stance orientated toward rational knowledge and a utopian stance oriented toward otherworldly redemption.

With this last point, Parsons links religion and science, and thereby turns the correspondence in a new direction. The tension between religion and science is a tension *within* the Christian tradition, not a tension *between* Christianity and some external "other". The other is within. Subsequent letters between May and October 1941 turn on the question of why this is and what it means for the social scientist.

Voegelin's comments on Calvin launch the conversation toward the subtle links between varieties of transcendent religion, modern utopian politics, and modern rationalism. In his letter of 8/1/1941, Parsons expresses great "surprise" at Voegelin's interpretation of Calvin. The central issue (not surprisingly) was the doctrine of Predestination, a matter that, Voegelin admits, "rests heavy on my soul" (8/4/1941). Parsons comes to the question with eyes trained by Weber's *Protestant Ethic*, expecting to find an account of how the doctrine, psychologically if not logically, stimulates active mastery over the world (8/1/1941). Instead, Voegelin investigates in great detail the logical meaning of the doctrine, especially the theological tensions in Calvin's version of it (10/19/1941).

Yet despite these expectations, Parsons concedes that the Weberian account is "not the whole story" (8/1/1941). Ascetic Protestantism depends not only on rationalizing religious concepts, but also on granting "the attribution of fundamental religious and emotional significance to a certain range of religious problems revolving about the state of grace" (8/1/1941). Here again Parsons points to differences between Calvinism,

<sup>9</sup> Gerhardt 1993 gathers Parsons' work on these topics from this period, but the question of the causes of anti-Semitism and Communism would continue to preoccupy him (in *e.g.* Parsons 1951, 1971, and 2006).

Catholicism, and Lutheranism. For the Calvinist, grace “cannot be made dependent on the summation or balancing of particular good works which could be built into a traditionalistic ethic”, as in Catholicism. Nor can grace be “dissociated from the active moral responsibility in secular affairs”, as in Lutheranism. Instead, the doctrine of Predestination offers “one polar solution” to the problem of how to make theological sense of the religious experience of grace.

Without denying the Weberian claims, Voegelin points not toward the *effects* of the doctrine of predestination but toward the question of what *caused* Calvin to assign it such theological weight. Here again, we find Voegelin and Parsons treating the various transcendental orientations *within* the Judeo-Christian tradition as sources of new anxieties and problems that can be taken in different directions, depending on factors like national history and geography – even personality (see Parsons 8/18/1941). Voegelin’s interpretation of Calvinism surprisingly stresses the latter, and concludes that Calvin’s personal character above all explains the disproportional significance of Predestination in Calvin’s theology. Calvin was a political man of action, “a statesman and ecclesiastical imperialist”. Luther, on the other hand, had all the “talents one should like to see in an influential cabinet member of a democratic welfare state” (Voegelin 1989-2009, v. 22: 248). For Calvin, the doctrine of predestination acts as the drum march for an army of the elect, united not just by church sacraments or personal mystical experiences but directly by God’s choosing. “Problems of action”, not “religious experiences connected with the state of grace”, required a doctrine of Predestination (8/4/1941).

The “problem of action” in question was how to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. Calvin’s creed, moreover, again in contrast to Luther, drew on “imagery strongly Old Testament; the chosen people, not the chosen individual captured his imagination” (8/4/1941). In Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, “symbols connected with the fate of Israel” drew Calvin’s attention. On Voegelin’s reading, Calvinism marks a return to the Judaic-prophetic task of forging a collective orientation around a transcendent mission, now given a peculiar activist zeal through the “great deal of insecurity” that beset Calvin, which could only be “overcome through the intoxication [...] of action” (8/4/1941). Transcendence engenders doubt, which in turn, in the specific form of anxiety that beset Calvin, generates impatience with theological speculation and impetus toward exuberant action.

In attributing the salience of the doctrine of transcendence to Calvin’s anxieties about redemption, Voegelin aimed to link Calvinist

theology to the millenarian politics characteristic of Calvinist peoples (8/4/1941). Calvin's peculiar inflection of a familiar Christian doctrine was for Voegelin in fact a politically motivated betrayal of the tradition represented by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas: "He liked the doctrine because it suited his temperament and his plans for organizing a Protestant International in rivalry with the Catholic Church".

It is obvious why this line of thinking would appear counter-intuitive to Parsons, especially given that it punctuates a conversation on modern anti-Semitism. Voegelin had neither explained the relationship between Germany's Lutheran past and its Nazi present, nor shown how his portrait of Calvinist activism corresponded to the political landscape of the twentieth-century United States. Even if those were not Voegelin's precise goals in the *History*, Parsons is in good company in being "a little surprised" by Voegelin's passion for tracing political ideas to their origins, which could at times make him seem inattentive to vital political differences in the present day (see, e.g., Arendt 1953).

Searching for common ground, perhaps, Parsons, citing Weber, Whitehead, and Robert Merton, immediately draws a somewhat different connection, to modern science. Calvin's interest in worldly action over theological speculation, Parsons suggests, may lay the foundation for Anglo-Saxon empiricism and its distaste for metaphysics. "The fact that instead of getting bogged down in [...] philosophical problems these men proceeded with scientific observation and generalization is at least partly to be attributed to the fact that their faith directly inhibited philosophical refinement" (8/18/1941). This observation becomes fundamental in Parsons' and Voegelin's discussion of Alfred Schütz: "Possibly one of my troubles in my discussion with Schütz lies in the fact that by cultural heritage I am a Calvinist. I do not want to be a philosopher" (8/18/1941). Parsons' mention of his dispute with Schütz, which seems at first to interrupt the dialogue about Luther, Calvin, and Weber, in fact extends that dialogue, as Parsons shifts from the political to the scientific heritage of transcendent religious traditions.

### *The methodology of social science*

Voegelin's very first letter to Parsons (1/20/1940) commends Schütz, whom Parsons had recently met, as "really an excellent theorist". By November of the same year, however, this theorist had written

a long, unpublished critique of *The Structure of Social Action* that raised fundamental questions about Parsons' conception of action (in Grathoff 1978: 8-60), and provoked Parsons to a defensive response (in Grathoff 1978, pp. 63-70, 72-93). The defensiveness was understandable, for Schütz had effectively, if unintentionally, asked Parsons to endorse these criticisms (Grathoff 1978: 5). Resuming their correspondence after a roughly seven-month hiatus, Voegelin next mentions Schütz to Parsons (5/9/1941) by way of recounting how he (Voegelin) came to acquire a copy of Parsons' "Actor, Situation, and Normative Pattern" (published in German translation in 1986 and finally in English as Parsons 2011). This mention of Schütz was almost certainly a subtle offer to "mediate" in the intellectual and personal facets of the relationship between Parsons and Schütz, both of which had become strained. In the event, Parsons eagerly enlisted Voegelin's help as "an impartial critic" who might help identify the sources of misunderstandings between him and Schütz (5/13/1941).

Voegelin obligingly gives Parsons a kind of sociological-anthropological picture of the state of German and Austrian social science. In Voegelin's telling, Austrian social science was dominated by frankly speculative questions stemming from a neo-Kantian focus on "self-conscious reflection on the instruments of perception and conception" rather than on the "object of science" (9/3/1941). In that context, Parsons' approach had to seem "naïve" – an accusation leveled by Schütz to which Parsons took particular offence. What Schütz meant by this charge, Voegelin explains, was not that Parsons was a childish naïf, but that his stance did not amount to a transcendental "critique" in the Kantian sense of the term (see Grathoff 1978: xii). Parsons sought a "theory of society" rather than a theory of the perceptual and cognitive apparatus by which knowledge of society is conditioned. Because Schütz aimed for the latter, even though he and Parsons used similar words like "action" and "meaning", they ended up talking past one another, much to their mutual frustration: "you and Schütz are interested in different levels of abstraction of social theory; your focus of interest is nearer to the empirical problems, his interest is nearer to the level of abstraction where the time-structure of human action becomes central" (9/3/1941). To use Kantian language, Schütz was interested in transcendental questions about the conditions of the possibility of social action and social science; Parsons was interested in devising an analytical scheme for observing social action scientifically.

If indifference toward transcendental speculation is naïveté, then it is a kind of naïveté that Parsons embraced, even if he still bridled at

the term. “By contrast with the naïve (in the naïve sense) empiricism of so much of American and English social science, I was initially attracted by the atmosphere of serious concern with methodological issues [at Heidelberg]. But, looking back, I think it is fair to say that I never really became profoundly interested in those things” (10/2/1941). What explains the two attitudes toward social science? Parsons here pursues the surprising comparison we noted above by drawing a link to Voegelin’s interpretation of Calvinist antipathy to metaphysical speculation. If that antipathy blinded Calvin’s followers to theological inconsistencies in his thought, it also freed them from torturing themselves with such difficulties and allowed them to get on with the business of scientifically ordering and pragmatically mastering the world. Parsons clearly enjoys envisioning himself as the heir to this stance, as when he notes that Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic* was uniquely transformative for him, “in the first place I suppose because the phenomena he was talking about were basic to my own cultural tradition” (10/2/1941). Parsons sensed that his Calvinist dispositions let him set aside speculative dramas (familiar to him from his Heidelberg days), so as to get to work on building a systematic theory of society grounded in the “‘Western’ traditions of science”. “However important from various points of view of philosophy and Weltanschauung the other level of abstraction may be, I feel considerable confidence that it is not capable of the same order of empirical fruitfulness, at least in its present state of development” (10/2/1941). Able in this way to discern potential social tensions, Parsons, like an engineer or, better, a doctor, could propose practical cures founded in reasoned observations at “a high level of generalization” (see Gerhardt 1993: 243-274, 291-324).

Parsons’ indifference to metaphysical questions is neither unreflective nor a-theoretical. In fact, he offers in these letters an intriguing if compact account of the foundations and legitimacy of his brand of social theorizing. The resulting picture differs markedly from the conventional portrait of Parsons as a sort of sociological Platonist (*e.g.* Gouldner 1971). Parsons’ social theory appears in these letters as historical rather than aprioristic – a scientific world-view that rests on an antecedent religious disposition or cultural heritage. Far from just a descriptive, genealogical claim, his theory suggests how to think and act in light of the contemporary political crisis: if “the Calvinistic branch of Protestantism”, Parsons writes, has been able to combine a “deeper religious orientation” with a “highly mechanized civilization”, the “Catholic heritage” has been “notably incapable” of this synthesis. “The Germans” too are “incapable of standing” the tension between modern science and fundamental



religious conviction without “going off into such nightmares as Nazism.” The social-scientific analog to this unease with the modern world, Parsons seems to be suggesting, is Schützian speculative thought. “I shy away from the philosophical problems underlying my scientific work. By the same token I don’t think [Schütz] wants to be a scientist as I understand the term until he has settled all the underlying philosophical difficulties. If the physicists of the 17<sup>th</sup> century had been Schützes there might well have been no Newtonian system” (8/18/1941). (Implicit is a comparison of Schütz to Leibniz, who faulted Newton for failing to explain the causal mechanism behind gravitation.) On the one hand, Parsons links a contemporary social-scientific debate about the nature of social action to a sixteenth-century religious debate about the salvation of the soul. On the other, he links a debate about scientific progress in general to the ability to endure, and at times release, the personal anxieties generated by critical reflection on the transcendental conditions of human knowledge and action. Nothing less than our “orientation to the modern situation”, is at stake (5/13/1941).

Parsons here advocates a scientific attitude that we call “critical naïveté”. The philosophical problems raised by transcendental reflection are best solved (in a psychological if not logical sense) not by speculation but by setting them aside when they become empirically unproductive. To those who know Voegelin only by his reputation as a critic of quantitative empiricism, his affinity for the attitude Parsons describes may come as a surprise. Throughout the correspondence Voegelin sides with Parsons over Schütz – that is, *for* theories of society and *against* speculative metaphysics of the conditions of the possibility of social science.

This unfeigned sympathy is more than a tactic to smooth things over between Parsons and Schütz. Of course Voegelin may have been tempted to flatter Parsons, and not just for his own sake. Before Voegelin even met Parsons, he expressed hope that the latter might serve as a professional reference for his fellow émigré (Voegelin 1989-2009, vol. 29, pp. 184-187). Schütz was Voegelin’s best friend – they had been close as students in Vienna, and stayed in touch faithfully until Schütz’s death in 1959 (see Schütz and Voegelin 2004, Schütz and Voegelin 2011). Even afterwards, writes Voegelin, Schütz ever remained “the silent partner in my thinking”. He and Schütz “had in common the project of designating [...] a theory of social action and of political order. In regard to concrete efforts, however, our ways parted” (Voegelin 1989-2009, vol. 6: 41-42). Their intellectual differences are well attested. Indeed, Voegelin had for years been drifting away

from his Austrian colleagues, including Hans Kelsen, on these very questions. The reader of Voegelin's *History of Political Ideas* – an effort to bring historical scholarship to bear on theological, political, and metaphysical matters, not the other way around – can see this drift taking place. It is, perhaps, telling that Voegelin showed Parsons manuscripts from the *History* that he did not send to Schütz (see Voegelin 1/16/1942). Voegelin, too, was on a path toward “critical naïveté”, toward an intellectual stance that could accept truth claims about a transcendent reality beyond material existence. Unlike Parsons, Voegelin's challenge – as heir to a tradition affirmed with conviction but not apodictic certainty – was to move from Schützian critique toward a more pragmatic stance and to cultivate thereby the ability to think and act.

### *The meaning of Max Weber*

To use Weberian terminology, Parsons and Voegelin find themselves on the same side of the fence that divides otherworldly-passive attitudes toward science from innerworldly-active attitudes. Both agree that the scientific endeavor should orient itself more toward action and empirical fruitfulness than toward metaphysical speculation. Yet when it comes to the question of what it *means* to stand on this side of the fence, a gulf opens. This divide becomes apparent in their exchange about Parsons' relationship to Weber. Weber reopened the problem of transcendence as a *question* for social scientists – on this Voegelin and Parsons agree. But what does this Weberian legacy mean for working social thinkers? With this question the correspondents part ways.

On Voegelin's reading, Parsons' systematic theory of institutions, while inspired by Weber, neither extends nor completes Weber's project. It is instead an instance of Parsons' own intellectual creativity. “[I]t would seem to me that *biographically* your own thought may be determined to a certain extent through your analysis and criticism of Weber, but that *essentially* your approach is new. You attack Weber's problem, the analysis of our civilization, from the pole that is opposite to his, and that was never accessible to him, from the pole of primary systematic thought” (9/24/1941). For Voegelin (as for Karl Jaspers before him), Weber's writings are *essentially* fragmentary: “he never placed himself in the center of systematic thought in order to organize the materials from such a center (9/24/1941)”. In Voegelin's interpretation

of Weber, the fragments gathered together as *Economy and Society* are not notes toward a future system but evidence of the inherently contingent and halting character of the creative intellect.

Parsons sharply disagrees with this interpretation of Weber (10/2/1941). Weber, he insists, was on to something that he himself could not fully realize and that was left to his followers (Parsons included) to piece together into a coherent system. But that Weber would welcome this eventuality goes for Parsons without question. Indeed, what makes the experience of reading Weber so different from reading “mere” historians, Parsons adds, is the unrelenting effort to order historical material according to a comprehensive analytical scheme (10/2/1941). For Parsons, Weber pointed the way toward a unifying analytical scheme for the social sciences; for Voegelin, Weber pointed toward precisely the impossibility of such a scheme.

The divide opening between Parsons and Voegelin would only yawn wider. With a kind of passion that to many observers veered close to a form of madness, Parsons would over the ensuing decades pursue the grail of a systematically unified theory of action. Voegelin reframed his own project more than once, following a pivotal series of conversations with Schütz in 1943 (to which their respective exchanges with Parsons may well have been a backdrop), pursuing the same questions, but never quite settling on an approach. For all their ambition, neither the philosophy of history he developed in the 1950s, nor the philosophy of consciousness he elaborated from the 1960s onward, aspired to empirical systematicity. His latest writings, which address the mysteries of human participation in Being, are barely recognizable as the work of a professional social scientist; they represent a speculative, contemplative stance closer to Schütz than to Parsons.

Or so it would seem. As we have noted, Voegelin remained friends with Schütz, while his correspondence with Parsons slackened and soon stopped altogether. However, his reflections on the relationship with Schütz also shed light on his attitude toward the kind of work that continued to occupy the Harvard sociologist. True, Voegelin increasingly occupied himself with ancient texts and his own philosophy of history and consciousness. But he also held fast to the belief that even if modern empirical research on human action – and a theoretically coherent synthesis of that research – were not his own vocation, they were essential to modern political science. Indeed, Voegelin would subsequently express his greatest praise for Schütz’s approach to social theory precisely when Schütz in 1955 came to accept “the social world as a historical given that is impenetrable to phenomenology”

(Voegelin 1989-2009, vol. 6, p. 43). For (the later) Voegelin, Schütz supplies an appropriate theory of action – but only once he abandoned the epistemological position that caused his initial clash with Parsons.

All this appears in Voegelin's encomium on Schütz's life and work as a whole, in which Schütz's is one *example* among others of an adequate theory of action. To read this as an implicit vindication of Parsons would be going too far; Voegelin in fact cites Parsons very infrequently, so we will refrain from speculation as to his opinion of Parsons after their correspondence ended. Nevertheless, a careful consideration of the correspondence yields a fresh perspective on how Voegelin understood his own philosophical work in its relation to the academic landscape of the day. We might even conjecture that Voegelin's labors in rarified historical arcana were made possible by the conviction that theoretically-based empirical social science was already headed down the right track.

This conjecture makes sense if and only if personal differences, not professional disagreements, led to their parting of ways. The correspondence and other primary sources would seem to suggest otherwise. Whereas in the early 1940s Parsons and Voegelin seem to have been in relatively frequent personal contact, by the 1960s they had certainly grown apart.<sup>10</sup> And it is precisely after the discussion of Weber that the correspondence loses its intellectual energy, and subsequent letters become rather perfunctory.

The seemingly small interpretive quibble over Weber went far deeper than a professional dispute. At stake, ultimately, was not Weber's scholarly corpus, nor Weber's biography, but the character of Weber as a charismatic *personality*, admired by a generation of scholars on both sides of the Atlantic. To Parsons, Weber was akin to a sociological John Calvin, an activist systematizer whose intellectual merits were attested by the fruits of those scholars working to extend his conceptual architecture. To Voegelin, in contrast, Weber was a sociological Socrates, whose writings were essentially fragmentary because Weber, like Socrates, lived zetetically, in constant awareness of his own essential ignorance. The interpretive disagreement is not a methodological quarrel by proxy, but rather an expression of radically different assessments of a common intellectual forebear.

<sup>10</sup> Lidz, personal communication to Daniel Silver, May 3, 2013.

*Transcendence and social science*

Whatever Parsons' and Voegelin's later divergences, that such different intellectual types, blazing such different intellectual paths, were able, however briefly, to undertake such a fruitful dialogue is itself quite remarkable.<sup>11</sup> This fruitfulness demonstrates the potency of transcendence as a subject of reflection. Reflections on the importance of world-transcendence occasions self-reflection on the assumptions and motivations driving the social scientist. While the correspondents drew different implications from these reflections on transcendence, politics, and social science, the questions themselves continue to resonate.

Parsons and Voegelin carried on their discourse about transcendence in private. But just a few years later, Karl Jaspers' *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (1949), and "the Axial Age" debate it sparked, would make a similar discourse public. In the first millennium BCE, Jaspers argued, societies worldwide underwent a process of "spiritualization". Human beings aspired to understand themselves and the world from outside and above, turning a critical eye on the narrative imagery of myth and the authority of tradition. They started to develop an idea of "the transcendent", distinguishing mundane from ultimate reality (whether understood as a personal God or impersonal Being).

Voegelin and Parsons both came to be key participants in ensuing debates about the significance of the axial period in particular (even when they do not use that term) and of transcendence in general. Their letters show why they were primed for this topic – each was training himself to trace contemporary social and political issues relentlessly back to their deep religious wellsprings. What is more, setting aside the intricacies of the Axial Age debate, the letters teach us something about what attracted thinkers like Parsons and Voegelin to this dynamic period of human history, namely, its dialogical value as a meeting point for diverse scholars to think through basic questions about their own work, and to be transformed in the process.<sup>12</sup>

One of the attractions of Jaspers' idea of the Axial Age, especially in the immediate post-War years, is the way it suggested deep points of convergence across seemingly highly divergent cultures. This political

<sup>11</sup> For a different assessment, see Buxton and Rehorick 2001.

<sup>12</sup> See Joas 2012 and LeQuire 2010 for similar arguments about the Axial Age debate

as contemporary "religious discourse" and "political discourse", respectively.

connection is clearly evident in the Parsons-Voegelin exchange, as noted above. Less clear in current discussions of the Axial Age debate is the link between transcendence and modern social science. As we saw in the letters, however, this connection is crucial. Both Parsons and Voegelin hold that contemporary attitudes toward scientific rationalism are rooted in historical experiences of religious transcendence. Each conception of transcendence – Platonic, Buddhist, Confucian, Catholic, Calvinist, Lutheran, etc. – advances a specific attitude toward nature, society, thought, and their interrelationship. Parsons puts the point most bluntly: “It seems to me that anything like modern Western rationalism would be utterly incomprehensible on a basis of orientation like that, for instance, of India or China” (9/27/40). This is neither a religious claim, nor merely a historical one. Rather, it is a claim about the conditions of the possibility of social science as we know it – a transcendental claim, in the Kantian sense. But unlike formally similar claims by Kant or Schütz, for instance, which begin and end with epistemological questions, it exhibits a scientist’s open trust in the validity of an intellectual tradition shaped by religious notions of transcendence. Yet such open trust also implies that initial orientations be left open to revision and re-interpretation through dialogue. Parsons’ ongoing interest in the axial period and its contemporary resonances shows this openness, as he took a more critical attitude toward Western rationalism and included meta-physical ideas in ways in which he might have balked at during his discourse with Voegelin.

Building on interests already apparent in the correspondence with Voegelin, Parsons’ later work offers a more sustained examination of the axial period. Parsons worked closely with a young Robert Bellah, extending the latter’s notion of “historic” societies. In *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* (1966) and *The System of Modern Societies* (1971), he also developed his own idea of “seedbed societies”. Though clearly rooted in Weberian comparative sociology, these concepts bear strong similarities to the Axial Age idea. They aim to compare and evaluate the evolutionary potential of alternative conceptions and institutionalizations of transcendence across Israel, Greece, China, and India. In Parsons’ terms: the “philosophic breakthroughs to higher levels of generalization in the constitutive symbolic systems of their cultures” occurred during the “middle of the first millennium B.C.” (Parsons 1966, p. 70).

Parsons’ analysis of the axial period maintains the general orientation of the exchange with Voegelin. He was interested primarily in

discerning the “most crucial ingredients of modernity”, and sought to evaluate why different “breakthroughs” (notably those of China, India, Islam, and Rome) failed to “evolve into modern societies”. (Their failures, Parsons stresses, were not “at the level of values” but concerned the “complex mode of integrating values with the many differentiated conditions of a complex society in a complex environment”) (Parsons 1966: 94). Yet Parsons’ later writings also exhibit a stronger critical stance toward Western rationalism, as he embraced certain aspects of the counter-cultural critiques of the 1960s as part of a thoroughgoing “expressive revolution” (even if he was worried about some of the excesses of the counter-culture) (Parsons 1978: 300-330). While never straying from his commitment to the Protestant ethic as a social value, he saw in the counter-culture a rekindling of early Christian themes of love, as well as a new opening toward bodily attunement and natural beauty, and hoped these might provoke productive dialogue with Eastern traditions (Parsons 1978: 320-322). Parsons, that is to say, approached the great religious and philosophic traditions with a view to the present. In his hands, those traditions modeled more or less successful ways of dealing with basic problems of socio-cultural integration, and supplied rich repositories of powerful cultural symbols that for good or ill could be drawn on by contemporary actors.

At the same time, Parsons in his later years turned toward speculative issues. He found new inspiration in Kant – not the rationalist Kant of the First Critique or the moralist Kant of the Second Critique, but the aesthetic Kant of the Third Critique, who sought to mediate “from the human point of view, between the necessities of the empirical world and the freedom of the world of morality” (Parsons 1978: 339). This return to Kant was joined by a novel extension of Parsons’ theoretical apparatus toward frankly metaphysical questions, as he added a new “telic” level to his system that stood beyond even culture, constituting the ultimate realities that lay back of any social system (Parsons 1978: 352-433). Parsons did not approach these realities with the phenomenologists’ pathos of re-enchanting mundane social life through rich description. But he did assert that any proper scientific description of human social order must include some account of the metaphysical backdrop of that order, and an analysis of how they interface. For existing in reference to such a backdrop is an irreducible part of “the human condition”.

If Parsons’ later engagement with questions of transcendence evinces a shift toward the “critical” end of the “critical-naïve”

spectrum, Voegelin initially moves in the other direction. Voegelin objected to Jaspers' *terminology* but took up Jaspers' *thesis* directly. In fact, Voegelin adopted it nearly verbatim as a central part of *The New Science of Politics* (1952) (Voegelin 1989-2009, v. 5: 135-136), and critically yet sympathetically appropriated and responded to it in *Order and History* vols. 1-3 (1956-1957), *Anamnesis* (1966), and *Order and History*, vol. 4 (1974). In the 1950s, Voegelin agreed that the discovery of transcendence, which he termed the "leap in being", occurred at roughly the same time in Israelite prophecy, in Greek tragedy and philosophy, and in the religious reforms and mystical speculations of the Chinese and Indian sages.

Like Parsons, Voegelin highlights the *scientific* nature of the axial breakthroughs. The discovery of transcendence, he argues, provides the basis for *descriptive* political science, because it leads to the realization that different religious and philosophical stances define individual human beings' characters, and "every society reflects the type of men of whom it is composed" (Voegelin 1989-2009, v. 5: 137). In other words, in order to understand a society we must understand the religious attitudes of its members and distinguish between transcendental and non-transcendental spirituality. Voegelin had long been interested in what accounted for differences in "national types of mind", *i.e.* the different complexes of symbols and experiences that characterized various political groupings. Armed with the Axial Age thesis (in *Order and History*, vol. 1), he is able to work toward a general typology that distinguishes between societies organized in "cosmological form" (such as Pharaonic Egypt), which lack a distinction between immanence and transcendence, and those organized in "historical form" (such as the Israel depicted in the more recent passages of the Hebrew Bible), which are heirs to the axial "leap in being". The former type tend to legitimate their political authority by attributing divine or quasi-divine status to their rulers; the latter distinguish between the necessity of earthly, human rule and the ultimate yet unseen rule of God.

The distinction might have been lost on the Israelites, who in Voegelin's interpretation made but did not critically reflect on their own "leap" into transcendence. The philosophers of ancient Greece, however, did. Platonic and Aristotelian conceptions of transcendence (as opposed to those of the Reformation) are highly "critical", nearly devoid of positive content and, for that reason, prone to reflective self-consciousness. It is in Greece that the discovery of transcendence – articulated chiefly in philosophical, not religious terms – first produces a robust *theory* of politics, understood as the science of mundane human



action. In all axial cases, this realization of transcendence serves a normative function as “an instrument of social critique”, allowing for the development of what Voegelin (following Henri Bergson) calls “the open society” (Voegelin 1989-2009, v. 5: 136-137). But in their breakthroughs the ancient Greeks gave the most thorough articulation of this basic critical stance, a *normative science* that will serve as the basis of Voegelin’s proposed antidote to Weber’s noble yet nihilistic value-free social science.<sup>13</sup> This is a far cry from Parsons’ evolutionary theory – and yet there is a surprising commonality, namely, the conviction that social science must acknowledge not only the historical influence of transcendence, but also its ongoing role in orienting human action.

In later years, Voegelin rejected the view that spiritual breakthroughs to transcendence could be fit neatly into a single chronological period, however broad. As he writes in *Order and History*, vol. 4 (1974), “There was no ‘axis time’ in the first millennium B.C.” (Voegelin 1989-2009, v. 17: 50; cf. Voegelin 1989-2009, v. 17: 276). Yet he acknowledges Jaspers’ “feat of philosophical insight” in attributing axial significance to a set of spiritual events. He agrees that the consciousness of epoch produced by the experiential encounter with divine transcendence allows for key advancements in human self-understanding (Voegelin 1989-2009, v. 17: 382-383). However, by the time Voegelin acknowledges his full debt to Jaspers, his thinking has already headed in another direction. With increasing conceptual refinement, he delves deeper and deeper into the structure of human consciousness. Though he seems to lose interest in the Axial Age, as his thinking matured, he sought to incorporate not only divine *transcendence*, but also the generic divine reality that is the source of human religious experience in all its forms. It is hard to say whether the older Voegelin grew more critical or more naïve. What is certain, though, is that his scholarly work became through the 1960s and 1970s less political, as his personal political opinions reportedly drifted rightward – another difference with Parsons that serves to highlight the remarkable character of their relatively brief *Briefwechsel*. It bears repeating that Jaspers inaugurates the Axial Age debate not with the statement of a theory, but with an article of “philosophical faith”. In a similar way, Voegelin’s critical appropriation of the Axial Age thesis at the height of his career is in fact part of

<sup>13</sup> In Voegelin’s view, the achievements of Greek normative theory include incipient individualism within society, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the birth of

universalism, understood as the recognition of the essential similarity of all human beings, regardless of political identity or social status (Voegelin 1989-2009, v. 5: 142-143).

a grand attempt to create a philosophical myth that is transparent as such, and efficacious to the extent that it has a sound basis in scholarship.

Parsons' scholarship is not particularly mythological; yet it is possible only in a world shaped by narratives of transcendence. In his case, increasingly reflective consciousness of these narratives is not only informative from a speculative standpoint, but fruitful from a scientific one. More prosaically, his contributions to the Axial Age debate, both directly and through his students, helped institutionalize inter-methodological and inter-disciplinary dialogue. While the correspondence with Voegelin does not seem to have served as a model, we nevertheless note that this singular exchange – made possible by a mutual concern for the way differing attitudes toward transcendence produce different individual and collective attitudes toward the world – played a decisive part in Parsons' distinctive brand of critical naïveté, which seems both a consequence and a precondition of engagement in the Axial Age debate. The Parsons-Voegelin correspondence brings the contours and stakes of the Axial Age debate into sharper focus, but also provides an indispensable and complementary pair of perspectives on how the debate functions as an idiom of critical reflection on social-scientific methodology, even among thinkers whose basic methodological orientations could not, on the surface, seem more different.

### *Conclusion*

Our interpretation of the correspondence might surprise readers who, quite rightly, see Parsons and Voegelin as representatives of different traditions, motivated by different concerns, and engaged in increasingly divergent intellectual enterprises. It might seem a tall order to prove that their differences can be harmonized. Yet the amicability of their correspondence and their ability to reach mutual understanding, and quickly, suggest there is more to their relationship than first meets the eye.

Parsons was, by cultural heritage, an American Calvinist; Voegelin was – by heritage and upbringing, if not by conviction – a German Lutheran, albeit one educated in Catholic and cosmopolitan Vienna. Unlike other intellectual émigrés of his generation, Voegelin avoided both coasts and instead chose to live for nearly thirty years in the South. He was reportedly confident and congenial in person, but his reader cannot quite shake the impression that on some level Voegelin's

mind was precisely the kind of anxious monad he described as quintessentially Lutheran and German. While Parsons succumbed for a time to the systematic thinker's great temptation – to pursue theoretical architectonics for their own sake – he was ever the outward- and forward-looking American. Voegelin, by contrast, was the tradition-saddled European, gazing alternately backwards and inwards.

Evidently, the two had different parts to play. But each thinker resolutely faced the same political and social-scientific challenges in a way that would make the most of each man's training and tradition. Their correspondence offers all the more reason to think that for both remarkable scholars this meant an increasingly self-aware approach to the business of scholarship from intellectual traditions fundamentally shaped by different ways of experiencing, understanding, and symbolizing transcendence.

This essay has endeavored to harvest some of the intellectual fruit of the correspondence between two thinkers who have played a major role in shaping contemporary discourse about the nature and problems of modern society and politics. By publishing them online, *The European Journal of Sociology* has granted readers the world over ready access to the letters. The entire correspondence – along with editorial notes on the letters' publication history, current location and condition, and people and books to which they refer – is available online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0003975613000192>. By being made widely available, the letters are sure to once again illuminate ongoing conversations about the legacies of the great world religions and the tasks of the social sciences alike.

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### Résumé

De 1940 à 1944, Talcott Parsons et Eric Voegelin, opposant au nazisme récemment émigré entretiennent une correspondance suivie que l'on peut classer sous cinq grandes entrées : Théorie de l'action et histoire des idées politiques, Formes de sécularisation, Méthodologie des sciences sociales, Legs de Max Weber, La transcendance des sciences sociales. Certaines lettres ont déjà été publiées, mais l'ensemble ne l'avait pas été. Il l'est désormais dans l'édition électronique de la revue. L'article ici proposé entend être une présentation et un guide pour éviter le piège d'anachronisme dans l'interprétation.

*Mots clés:* Parsons ; Voegelin ; Religion ; Théorie de l'action ; Antisémitisme ; Transcendance ; Période axiale.

### Zusammenfassung

Von 1940 bis 1944 führen Talcott Parsons und Eric Voegelin, ein kürzlich ausgewanderter Naziregimegegner, einen Briefwechsel, der in fünf große Abschnitte unterteilt werden kann: Handlungstheorie und politische Ideengeschichte, Säkularisationsformen, sozialwissenschaftliche Methodik, Webers Vermächtnis, Transzendenz der Sozialwissenschaften. Auch wenn einige Briefe bereits veröffentlicht worden sind, gab es bis dato keine Gesamtausgabe. Sie liegt nun als elektronische Ausgabe der Zeitschrift vor. Der hier veröffentlichte Beitrag versteht sich als Einführung und Leitfaden, um eine Irreführung der Interpretation durch den Anachronismus zu verhindern.

*Schlagwörter:* Parsons; Voegelin; Religion; Handlungstheorie; Antisemitismus; Transzendenz; Axial Age.